Waterbird monitoring and birdwatcher training in Djibouti, February 2001

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En février 2001, des comptages préliminaires d'oiseaux d'eau ont été effectués le long de la côte sud-est de Djibouti afin de déterminer la faisabilité de suivis réguliers à long terme. Cette zone est d'importance internationale et mérite le statut de site Ramsar. Par la même occasion, une petite équipe de conservateurs djiboutiens a été formée à l'identification des oiseaux sur le terrain et aux techniques de comptage.

Although best known ornithologically for its endemic gamebird, the Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, and the spectacular spring and autumn raptor migration across the Bab-el-Mandeb straits, Djibouti also has an extensive area of mudflats along its south-east coast which has long been suspected as being of international importance for passage and wintering waterbirds. However, the area has never been counted systematically.

Following an IUCN-funded consultancy in December 1988 to collect and compile data for the ornithological section of the Djibouti government's National Biodiversity Action Plan (during which GRW and HJW first met HAR, Djibouti's only native birdwatcher), 29 projects were proposed to IUCN and the Djibouti government to assist in the conservation of the country's biodiversity, and various recommendations made to facilitate their implementation[2]. Monitoring of waterbirds along this section of coast was one such project and although requiring a comparatively small investment of resources, its implementation was considered to have great potential as it would contribute to fulfilling the objectives of four of the projects in the report:

Exploratory site and bird survey work: identifying the most important core areas for birds (and other wildlife); training Djiboutians in field survey techniques, bird identification and mapping skills; and field-testing standardised data collection forms.

Regular monitoring: monitoring of sites identified in project 1 and ascertaining bird usage through the year, or collecting comparable data at regular intervals at these sites to provide an index for monitoring bird populations. These data to be used to provide accurate baseline data and assist in prioritising sites identified as being suitable or potentially suitable for designation as protected areas.

Sign up to and implement international conventions: this would provide Djibouti with a broad structure of protection for globally important species and habitats; demonstrate the Djibouti government's commitment to species and habitat conservation; and provide access to the expertise and support of the global conservation movement. In the case of the area to be surveyed, the relevant conventions were Ramsar and the African–Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA).

Site designation: enforcement of existing, and introduction of new, legislation for designating and protecting sites of conservation importance throughout Djibouti in order to establish an effective protected areas network.

Monitoring results

A separate paper describing the count area and detailed results, both of this visit and subsequent counts during 2001 by HAR, is currently in preparation. As mentioned briefly in *Bull. ABC* 8: 148, a minimum of 10,072 waterbirds of 66 species was recorded, with internationally important numbers of three species (Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*, Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus* and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*) and three main roost locations located. In addition, several species formerly considered rare or vagrants in Djibouti were found to be more regular, and the first Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* for Djibouti was discovered.

Training

The survey team consisted of GRW, HJW, HAR, Moussa Omar Youssouf, Houssein Rirache Robleh and Saso Fumiaki (Fig 1). With the exception of the authors, team members' birdwatching experience was minimal, therefore initially training concentrated on species identification and basic birdwatching skills. To assist this, extensive use was made of material in the Shorebird Studies Manual[1], produced by the Asian Wetland Bureau, which provided team members with a good grounding in wader topography and feeding and flight action. The manual also proved valuable for covering topics such as writing field notes and survey techniques. At the start of the project each team member was given a selection of reprints from the manual plus a field notebook and pencil and access to field guides in both English and French (the official national language in Djibouti).

Throughout, the emphasis was on participatory learning and solving of identification problems, with team members

encouraged to consult each other and the field guides before, as a last resort, asking GRW or HJW. This worked well and helped build both individual confidence and team spirit. Wherever possible, simple fun exercises were undertaken in the field to test comprehension and to practice skills. One popular exercise was asking each team member to choose a species they felt confident identifying, writing a description with the bird in front of them and then describing it to the other team members. HJW sketched each bird from the description given and everyone attempted to identify it. This highlighted the basic pieces of information required for identification—size, shape, plumage and behaviour—and the need to record these accurately. It also helped test observation skills and concentration. Another fun activity was organised at the end of the survey, a '20-questions quiz' to assess how much team members had learnt. Again this was much enjoyed and appreciated.

As much time as possible was spent allowing team members to practice waterbird identification and note-taking before any practice counts were undertaken (Fig 2). The nature of the study area permitted observation and counting to be carried out under a range of conditions, ranging from birds feeding along the shoreline adjacent to the road, affording close views of plumage details (Fig 3), to birds spread over the exposed mudflats at long range and in heat haze where use of size, shape and behaviour were critical to identification. When high-tide roosts were located, the additional complication of large numbers of birds congregated, often in mixed flocks, added another dimension to the training exercise.

Given the limited amount of time and, as it transpired, the range and number of species encountered, all of the team completed the project being able to identify the commonest waterbird species occurring around Djibouti city and understanding the principles of counting. It was accepted that for subsequent counts, accurately determining the numbers of individual species was likely to prove extremely difficult but that it should be possible to obtain overall waterbird numbers and detailed counts of the larger, more conspicuous species. Even given these limitations, the data will prove valuable for supporting efforts to persuade the Djibouti government to sign the Ramsar Convention and, hopefully, to establish means of protecting at least some parts of the tidal mudflats. The project also highlighted the considerable importance visiting birdwatchers can play in providing training and encouragement to local birdwatchers, who are often working in isolation.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the Djibouti Ministry of the Environment, and particularly to Mr Mohamed Ali Moumin, Director of the Direction de l'Environnement, for approving and making the necessary in-country arrangements for the survey. The Direction's practical support in making a vehicle, driver and our counterparts available were particularly valuable contributions to the success of the project. We are also most grateful for the support of the Office National du Tourisme de Djibouti (ONTD), particularly of its Director, Mohamed Abdillahi Wais. His generosity facilitated the involvement of HAR for the entire two weeks of the project. Financial support came from many sources: Wetlands International, OPS (Organisme de Protection Sociale, Djibouti), ABC (the African Bird Club) and OSME (the Ornithological Society of the Middle East). Equally valued was the donation of a telescope and tripod by the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) to Djibouti's new NGO, the Wildlife Protection Organisation.

References

1. Howes, J. and Bakewell, D. 1989. *Shorebird Studies Manual.* Kuala Lumpur: Asian Wetland Bureau Publication No. 55.
2. Welch, H.J. and Welch, G.R. 1999. A report on the birds of Djibouti and the Bankoualé Palm *Livistona carinensis.* Biodiversity Report No. 4. Privately published.

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Captions to photos on page 32

Figure 1. Survey team (from left to right): Houssein Abdillahi Rayaleh (formerly Office National du Tourisme de Djibouti, now Ministère de l'Habitat, de l'Urbanisme, de l'Environnement et de l'Aménagement du Territoire), Geoff Welch (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, UK), Saso Fumiaki (Japanese volunteer working for the Direction de l'Environnement), Houssein Rirache Robleh (formerly Ministère National de l'Education, now Direction de l'Aménagement du Territoire et de l'Environnement au Ministère de l'Habitat, de l'Urbanisme, de l'Environnement et de l'Aménagement du Territoire), Moussa Omar Youssouf (Direction de l'Environnement) and Hilary Welch (freelance consultant, UK) (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

Figure 2. Practising identification skills, Loyada coast south of Djibouti city (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

Figure 3. Birding at a roadside pool next to Présidence de la République, Djibouti city (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

Figure 4. Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*, Route de Venise, Djibouti (Geoff & Hilary Welch)

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Corrigenda to *Bull. ABC* 9 (2)

On p 133, Figures 1–3 are by Paul Manners and Figures 4–5 are by J. & D. Hook, not as stated. Our apologies to the photographers concerned. On pp 153 and 154, the figures accompanying the paper on Grumeti river forests did not reproduce as intended. The correct figures are produced below.

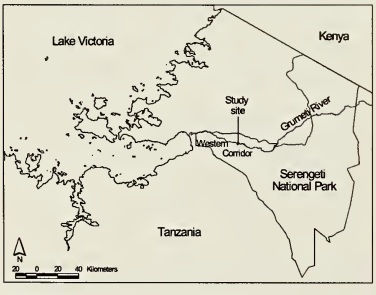

Figure 1. Location of the study site

Figure 2. Main habitat types and structures of the study site.